

David Halberstam

THE PROGRAMMING OF ROBERT McNAMARA

The career that reflected and powerfully influenced America's journey in the Sixties, from high confidence to the deepest self-doubt.

HE WAS BOB, BOB McNAMARA: taut, controlled, driving—climbing mountains, harnessing generals—the hair slicked down in a way that made him look like a Grant Wood subject as Secretary of Defense. A fat McNamara was as hard to imagine as an uncertain one. The glasses straight and rimless, imposing; you looked at the glasses and kept your distance. He was a man of force, moving, pushing, getting things done: *Bob got things done*. No one would ever take Bob for a European; he was American through and through, with the American drive, the American certitude and conviction. He exulted in action, pushing everyone, particularly himself, to new limits, long hours, working breakfasts, early bedtimes, moderate drinking, no cocktail parties. He was always rational, always the Puritan—not, however, a prude. And certainly not a Babbitt. How he did not want to be a Babbitt! He sat behind that huge desk, austere and imposing. Even without the hair and the glasses, a Secretary of Defense of the United States of America—with a budget of \$85 billion a year, not to mention nuclear warheads at his disposal—was likely to be imposing enough anyway.

One was always aware of his time, aware that one was imposing on it: speak quickly and be gone, make your point, in and out, keep the schedule, lunch from 1:50 to, say, expansively, 2:00 P.M., and, above all, do not engage in any philosophical discussions, *Well, Bob, my view of history is. . . .* Time was of the essence, to be rationed and saved, time was not just money; it was, even more important, action, decisions, cost effectiveness. There was always too little time, too much to do. Indeed, it became part of private Pentagon legend that if you really wanted to make a point with McNamara, the best way to do it was on a trip, one of those long flights to Saigon or Honolulu, hours and hours aboard planes with nowhere else to go, no appointments waiting. Always so driven, always under such pressure, always of course trying to conceal it, to be cool, to control emotion, though not always successfully, and there was always somehow the price.

He would, for instance, while he was in Detroit, grind his teeth in his sleep, wearing down the enamel, until Marg McNamara realized what was happening and sent him to the dentist who recapped them.

If the body was tense and driven, the mind was mathematical, analytical, bringing reason from chaos, always reason. It was a mind that could continue to call on its mathematical kind of sanity long after the others, the good liberal social scientists who had never gotten beyond their original logarithms, had trailed off. Though finally, when the mathematical version of sanity did not work out, when it turned out that the computer had not fed back the right answers and had underestimated those funny little far-off men in their raggedy pajamas, he would be stricken with a profound sense of failure; he would, at least briefly, be a shattered man. But that was to come later. At his height, he always seemed in control; you could, said Lyndon Johnson, who once admired him and trotted him out on numerous occasions to perform, almost hear the computers clicking away. (Though when things went sour and Lyndon felt betrayed, his tongue, always acid for those who let him down, did not spare his former pet: he would say to the men around him, “I forgot that he had only been President of Ford for one week.”) And even, his tenure as Secretary of Defense coming to an end with the knowledge of the failure of his policy and with his turning against the war, even then his faith in his kind of rationality did not completely desert him: the war was a human waste, yes, but it was also no longer cost effective, we were putting in more for our air power than we were getting back in damage, ten dollars of input for one dollar of damage, and the one dollar was being put up by the Soviet Union and not North Vietnam anyway.

But he was an emotional man as well, weeping at his last Pentagon ceremony, his friends at the very end worried about his health, and about what the job and the war had done to him. Though not noted for his wit—no one had ever accused him of an overdeveloped sense of irony—he was often a gay

David Halberstam's article on McGeorge Bundy for the July 1969 issue of Harper's was the beginning of a major book on the origins of the conflict in Southeast Asia—how and why we went to war in Vietnam. This article is a segment from the book.

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and gregarious companion to the Kennedys. Why is it, asked Bob Kennedy, that they call him the computer and yet he's the one all my sisters want to sit next to at dinner? The family loyalty that began in 1961 endured through tragedy after tragedy: Bob, said Ethel to him after Chappaquiddick, get up here; there's no one here but women. So it would not be surprising in the latter part of that incredible decade, when the final returns were coming in on what Camelot had wrought, that the Kennedy insiders wanted to spare Bob. They were by then quite willing to write off the war, and the men who had made it—Bundy evoked no fondness, to say the least, nor of course Austin's own L. B. Johnson—but Bob . . . If Bob had been in on planning the big escalation in 1965, they said (and they doubted even that), then Lyndon had pushed him into it: Bob always was a little too eager to please (though George Ball, who had fought the good fight against both escalation and McNamara and had the wounds to show for both, would grow tired of telling his liberal friends that Bob was fooling them with his dovish noises; he might sound dovish around ADA people, but he was rough as hell inside those meetings, and always on the other side).

NO ONE EVER DOUBTED HIS ALMOST ferocious sense of public service, yet something in his overall style, perhaps the very thing that made him so effective, bothered many of his colleagues. This was a relentlessness, a total belief in what he was doing, a willingness to knock down anything which stood in his way. So that other men, who were sometimes wiser, given to greater doubt, would be pushed aside.

McNamara would, for instance, dissemble—not just to the public, they all did that in varying degrees, but even inside the private, high-level meetings: always for the right reason, it was always in order to serve the office of the President, Bob knew what was good, but it was sometimes at the expense of his colleagues. Experienced McNamara watchers, men fond of him, would swear they knew when McNamara did not believe what he was saying. His voice would get higher, he would speak faster, he would become more insistent. He was decent and loyal, but perhaps that was it, perhaps there was too much loyalty, loyalty of that corporate kind which was to the office rather than to himself. In this he was virtually the embodiment of the liberal contradictions of the entire era, the contradictions that grew up between our commitment to do good and our commitment to wield power; most of what was good in us and what was bad in us was there, the Jeffersonian democracy became a superpower. Near the end of his tour he had gone to Harvard, where in another and gentler time he might have been revered but now was first almost captured by the radical students and later, speaking to a group of professors, asked to explain about the two McNamaras, McNamara the quantifier, who had given us the body count in Vietnam, and McNamara the warm philosopher, who had delivered a speech in

Montreal that had seemed to contradict his and Johnson's actual policies. (Johnson, hearing of the speech, flew into a rage, demanding to know who at the White House had cleared it, and the answer, that it was Bill Moyers, helped to speed Moyers' own departure.) Bob's answer: I gave the Montreal speech because I could not survive in office without giving it, nor live with my own conscience, and it gave me another ten months; but the price I paid for it in the Congress and the White House is so high that if I had to do it over again, I would not give that speech.

McNamara was, then, very much in place in the Kennedy Administration, for they were rationalists all. They were not dissenting from the assumptions of the Eisenhower years, but had entered office pledged to be more effective, more active, to cut a lot of the flab off. For the cool young President he was an ideal Secretary of Defense. He was not of the Establishment as Bundy was, nor had he served it as Dean Rusk had, first in the State Department and then at the Rockefeller Foundation. He was the man from Detroit, and it would be his job to translate ideas into workable processes at Defense, accepting their assumptions without doubt or misgiving. (Detroit is a place under Establishment surveillance to make sure that it can still outproduce Moscow and Berlin in heavy cars; Detroit is, in the eyes of the Establishment, an index.) But if McNamara was not of the Establishment, he had done his time in government and served well—under Bob Lovett in the Air Force during World War II, a man to make note of even then, whose skill and perseverance had not been forgotten. Fifteen years later, when Lovett, turning down Defense himself, was asked for names, he would remember McNamara. Indeed, McNamara had first come to public attention (though not by name) in 1947, in a *Fortune* magazine article on Lovett. The article told how Kaiser had wanted to ferry all freight overseas in flying boats, but Lovett had proved that it would require 10,022 planes and 120,765 aircrews to move 100,000 long tons from San Francisco to Australia, whereas the same task was already being handled by 44 surface vessels manned by 3,200 seamen. The article pointed out further that as Air Force casualties had risen, Lovett had instituted Stat Control (statistical control office), a worldwide reporting service anchored by a battery of IBM machines which produced life-expectancy estimates for every member of every aircrew. The idea was to prove to an airman that he had a 50-50 chance to come home while the war was still going on, and an 80 per cent chance for survival. Eventually, it became so efficient that it could predict how many planes would be available in every theater every day for every operation. It was, said *Fortune*, the "super application of proven business methods to war, and so successful that in a few months after hostilities ceased, the Ford Motor Company hired the two principal operators. . ." His promise, then, had been realized, he had gone on to greater things at Ford, they had just made him president.

IT WAS IN 1960 THE CALL HAD GONE OUT from the Kennedy talent scouts to the Ford Motor Company. Actually, the contact had been made even earlier, during the campaign. Neil Staebler, Democratic party chairman in Michigan, had suggested to Sarge Shriver that Staebler's friend Bob McNamara should head the businessmen's committee for Kennedy-Johnson—a job not particularly overwhelmed with applicants—that McNamara typified the new liberal businessman, had considerable prestige among his colleagues throughout the country, had voted for Democrats in the East, and that he came from the prestigious house of Ford. Shriver had liked at least part of the idea—Ford—but had decided if we go for Ford, we'll go for the top, we'll get Henry himself, a decision which lacked only Henry's concurrence. And the idea of McNamara was lost in the shuffle. In December, Shriver, now in charge of the recruitment drive, would call Staebler again: How did your friend McNamara vote? For Kennedy, I think. Could you find out? Why? Because we want him in the Administration. Staebler had warned Shriver that McNamara would not take the job, being the most conscientious of men and was just taking over a system built specifically around him. McNamara, he found out, had voted for Kennedy. Meanwhile the Kennedy people were also checking, getting political clearance from their Detroit people, chief among them Jack Conway, one of Reuther's brightest aides. Conway, too, gave McNamara high marks. Though the rest of the auto hierarchy was a solid Republican fortress, its members living in the same elegant suburbs, belonging to the same posh country clubs, McNamara was something of a maverick. He deliberately lived outside Detroit and away from the other auto people, in the Ann Arbor groves of academe. His style of life was different and so were his views: he was liberal on civil rights, and he supported Democrats from time to time, men like Phil Hart and James O'Hara. He had *not*, rather vocally *not*, supported Soapy Williams, disliking Williams' close ties to organized labor; there were those in Detroit who noticed a surprising intensity in McNamara's opposition to Williams, as though given a chance to be orthodox and vote Republican, he was seizing it eagerly. His liberalism on most questions did not extend to labor, about which he took a hard line; labor kept interfering with his cost effectiveness, it and its constant pressure were the great bugaboo in the industry. McNamara and his Democratic friend Staebler had argued regularly about labor, about the fact that American labor costs were too high, and that we were losing our competitive edge. Nevertheless, to Conway, McNamara was by far the best of the breed, an impressive man to work with, whom you could engage even when you disagreed, and whose mind you could change.

He was called to Washington, made a favorable impression, and was offered his choice of either Treasury or Defense. The Treasury job had little attraction; he asked one member of the Kennedy team what the Secretary of the Treasury does, and



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when told that he sets the interest rates, said, "Hell, I do more about setting the interest at Ford than the Secretary of the Treasury." If one wanted a platform for national service, then Secretary of Defense, under a vital activist President, would be greater than heading the Ford Motor Company. One could both exercise more power and do more to direct that power to ends one believed were good.

He and Kennedy got on immediately. McNamara the Puritan asked Kennedy if he had really written *Profiles in Courage*, and Kennedy assured him that he had. McNamara expressed doubts about his training for the job; Kennedy answered that he knew of no school for Presidents either. He demanded of Kennedy, and got, permission to pick his own men. And he did to an exceptional degree pick his own men (not, apparently, always, since Secretary of the Navy went to John Connally of Texas, a close friend of the Vice President). They were an uncommon group of bright, fast, analytical, self-assured men who, though they in part helped lead us into the war in Vietnam, were later, unlike other layers of the Washington bureaucracy, to turn and help lead the fight to extricate the country from it. During the Kennedy-Johnson years, it was said, the three most talent-laden places in Washington were the White House under Bundy, the Justice Department under Robert Kennedy, and Defense under McNamara.

In any case, having accepted the job, he returned to Detroit to get clearance from Henry Ford. The decision was a painful one for Ford; in giving the presidency to McNamara he had gone outside the traditional auto structure for a non-auto man and had then based an entire production system around him. Thus not without distress, Ford let him go. McNamara was, in the meantime, doing his homework, talking with past Defense Secretaries and other experts, and a week later showed up in Washington thoroughly prepared. In a week he had

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mastered the main issues before him and had singled out the major areas of work. The Kennedy group was impressed. McNamara seemed to be off and running while the rest of them were still in the standing start. He had developed that capacity at Ford, to prepare himself so thoroughly in the more intricate areas that other men, mere mortals, grew timid. The most abstract figures seemed to roll right off his tongue, seemed, coming from him, simple and clean.

The relationship with Kennedy, thus happily begun, was to continue in a state of mutual admiration and ease. In fact, McNamara was to be one of the few people working for Kennedy who managed to cross the great divide and become part of the President's private social world. Midway through the Kennedy Administration, a reporter working on a magazine article would ask McNamara who his friends were, and McNamara would answer, Well, he had lots of friends. I mean whom do you call when you want to relax, chew the fat, or have a beer? And McNamara would answer, "The Kennedys—I like the Kennedys."

His leaving Detroit, though, did involve an enormous financial sacrifice, perhaps as much as \$3 million (he had somewhat less than a million to his name when he went to Washington). One block of stock options was about to mature in just a few weeks, and Henry Ford had even graciously suggested he delay for the two weeks in selling, but such an arrangement would have interfered with McNamara's swearing-in ceremonies, and McNamara played by the rules. Anyway, he had always been far more interested in power than in money. Power to do good, of course.

HIS GROWING UP HAD BEEN SIMPLE—and enviable. Good parents. Good values. Good education. Good marks. He was born in San Francisco in 1916 the son of Robert J. McNamara and Clarannell Strange (thus the middle name, upon which his critics would so joyously seize in later years). His father, who married late, was fifty when his namesake was born. He was sales manager for a San Francisco wholesale shoe firm. The father was Catholic, the mother Protestant, and young McNamara was brought up a Protestant.*

When Bob and his sister were young, the family moved across the Bay to Oakland, which boasted a good school. They lived in Alameda, a pleasant middle-class neighborhood. More than forty years later, his teachers would recall him with pleasure. Bob always had his homework done, and was always well-behaved. In high school, Piedmont High, he received excellent marks, joined all the right clubs and honor societies, worked on the year-

*Once, during the height of Lyndon Johnson's love affair with McNamara, the President thought of the Secretary of Defense as a Vice-Presidential possibility and called around to Democratic pols with the idea. "You could even see Lyndon thinking it out—the Protestants will assume he's a Protestant, and the Catholics will think he's a Catholic," a former White House aide would reminisce.

book, sang in the glee club, was president of a secret fraternity pledged to service. An early IQ test put him above the norm, very bright but not exceptional. From Piedmont he went on to Berkeley, at a time when Robert Gordon Sproul was making Berkeley into a great university. Here his gift for math was beginning to show, the work coming so easily that he had time to read and work in other courses. His professors assumed that he would become a teacher; he did not seem to have the kind of drive, the hustle, which one felt went with a business career, but seemed rather on the scholarly side. Vacations he spent gold mining (unsuccessfully), climbing mountains, learning to ski. From Berkeley to the Harvard Business School, where for the first time his enormous ability in accounting control began to show and where for the first time he worked at applying this ability to management techniques. He graduated in 1939, moved back to the Bay area to work for Price Waterhouse, started seeing an old friend named Marg Craig, was asked back to Harvard Business to teach, and married Marg Craig (whom everyone would consider a good and humanizing influence on McNamara, much of what was good in Bob, friends thought, coming from Marg's generous instincts). At Harvard he taught accounting and was a particularly good, well-organized teacher, but he was restless. America's involvement in World War II was approaching. The Navy had turned him down because of weak eyes, and he was trying to join the Army when the Harvard Business School went to war.

ROBERT LOVETT HAD BEEN A WORLD WAR I aviator ("I have Naval Air Wings number 57"). As a young banker overseas between the wars he had been plagued with a bad stomach, had lived on baby foods, and thus had forsaken most of the social life expected of a successful, well-connected young banker. Instead he had devoted himself to the political and military study of a decaying Europe and of the meaning of the Hitler buildup. He had predicted accurately the fall of France and had sensed that it would be a war no one could contain, a war, moreover, in which air power—a mere embryo in the first world war—would become the decisive factor. He had returned to America, and as a private citizen had made his own study of what America's air needs and resources were. He had made a private tour of all U.S. air plants and airfields, shocked by the inadequacy of what he found. He had already decided that with Europe at war, and given the limit of German transcontinental bombers, American industry could by flexing its muscles build the greatest air force in the world, and that this air force could wreak massive saturation bombing on the enemy's industrial might. James Forrestal he knew through banking connections, and Forrestal, then Secretary of War, had sent him to see Robert Patterson at Air. Lovett quickly became Assistant Secretary, and when the U.S. entered the war, his private planning was to save the country crucial, vital time. But it was a

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very difficult period: Lovett could not even find out how many airplanes there actually were in the country. Lovett and one of his top deputies, Charles Thornton, had decided to try to harness American industry for the great war effort, and what they needed first and foremost was a giant statistical brain to give them a rundown on the current condition. To train the officers they needed for statistical control, the brain of this giant—which would send the right men and the right parts to the right places, or make sure that when crews arrived at a base there were enough instructors—they went to the most logical place, Harvard Business School. This was the symbolic step in America's becoming a superpower: already the real problem was not so much might as control, the careful and accurate projection of just how powerful we were. (Thus, twenty years later, when we were an acknowledged superpower, Kennedy turned for his Secretary of Defense to someone who was not so much a production man as the supreme accountant, the determination of what we had and what we needed being more essential than the qualities of the old-style professional production man who ramrodded manufacturing schedules through, who went by instinct, and who knew nothing about systems control.) The Business School readily agreed to the project, and McNamara agreed to become a teacher in Lovett's and Thornton's program. He was an assistant professor at the time, and he was so effective that Thornton soon pulled him from Harvard and attached him to the Air Force. Finally McNamara had found something on which to fasten his energy, and his curious cold passion. He had a larger cause, and those traits of mind and personality which would eventually make up his legend began to show themselves. Until then he had been another bright young man, intelligent, hard-working, able. Thornton would remember the young McNamara of those early days as being strikingly similar to the mature McNamara. ("I'm sure that now that he's at the World Bank, only the Bank exists and Defense is behind him, just as when he was at Defense, Ford was behind him," he would say.) Thornton sent him to England to work out problems on the B-17 bomber program, finally got him a commission as a temporary captain in the Army Air Force. Then he went to China with the 20th Air Force, where, it has been said, he was the best and most effective statistical officer of any unit, creating new and more exacting criteria, the creative statistician. And when the problem of organizing the B-29 program arose—to become the major project for the Air Force—McNamara was put onto it. Other men would make their reputations out of the development of the B-29, but Thornton came to believe that the real genius of the operation was McNamara, putting a group of infinitely complicated pieces together, doing program analysis, operation analysis, making sure that the planes and the crews were readied at roughly the same time; all this before the real age of computers so that he had to work it out himself. He worked endlessly and sought no credit. He held

the operation together, kept its timing right, kept everything on schedule. It was an awesome performance for a man not yet thirty.

McNamara had planned to return to Harvard after the war. His years there had been happy, and he was not by instinct a businessman; he got, then or later, little pleasure from the mere making of money. Challenges fascinated him, but neither worldly goods nor profit as things in themselves. Thus why not return to Harvard and the teaching of those beloved statistics? It was amazing what statistics had done, it was awesome to imagine what they might do in the future. Cambridge, where one could enjoy the university atmosphere, talk with men who were in other fields, and yet still involve oneself in statistics and their use, was an appealing place. Throughout his life he would tell friends that the years at Harvard had been among his happiest (something no one has ever heard him say about Detroit).

But Thornton, more outgoing and imaginative, more entrepreneurial than McNamara, had other ideas. To Thornton, the Air Force had not been simply a part of a vast and impressive wartime enterprise, but something more, a case study in instant corporate success. It had gone from 295 pilots trained in the year before Pearl Harbor to 96,000 trained the year after, planes built, flight crews trained, all dovetailed. It had been a staggering task and an enormous success. And they had done it, not the old, tired men who had headed prewar companies, but this group of talented young people that Thornton and Lovett had created, young modern minds not tied to the myths, the superstitions, and the business prejudices of the past. Thornton knew there would be a reconversion from military to civilian production, and the business world would be filled with new opportunities. He saw his team, men who had gained twenty-five years of experience in four years and who had delivered. Under normal business conditions they might not have attained comparable positions of power and influence until they were nearly fifty. Thornton himself, the oldest of them, was now thirty. He began to think of the possibility of selling them as a group, all that expertise and managerial talent bound together. It was not just that they could bring a better price as a group, but, more important to Thornton, if they were really to create something new and bold in the business world, then the chances were far greater that they could really affect that world and its ways. ("If you went in with one or two people you could get lost or chewed up: if you were going to convert a relatively large company quickly, you needed a group," he would recall.) He talked it over with some members of his team, and most of them were enthusiastic. Only McNamara had serious objections: he wanted to return to Harvard, the idea of business did not excite him. But he had come up with a mild case of polio, and Marg with a more serious case, necessitating considerable doctor bills. ("I said, 'Bob, you've got those doctor bills and you can't go back there to Harvard on \$2.600 a year,' and he thought and

said, 'I guess you're right,' and he was on board," Thornton said.)

For the team, there were two immediate possibilities: one was Robert Young of Canadian-Texas and the other was the Ford Motor Company. Thornton went by to see Young, who offered him a job and said he could bring two or three men with him. Ford seemed a better idea. The company would have to be retooled and reconverted. They knew that financially it had not done well (though they did not know how badly it had done during the preceding twenty years, showing a profit only once since 1927, in the year 1932), and it had been taken over by young Henry Ford, their own age—he was twenty-eight—who now needed desperately to modernize the company that his grandfather had founded and then let slip. They sent Ford a cable, saying, in effect: bright young management team, ran Air Force, ready to work. Thornton made an early contact: eight of them went out there and impressed Henry Ford, and the deal was set. Ford told Thornton to set the salaries; they ranged from \$10,000 to \$16,000, and Thornton gave McNamara the second highest. The group became the famous Whiz Kids: Thornton, McNamara, Arjay Miller, J. E. Lundy, Charles Bosworth, Jack Reith, Jim Wright, Ben Davis Mills, Wilbur Anderson, and George Moore. Ford, at that bleak moment in his company's history, had nowhere to go but up: nonetheless, it was an extraordinary decision for him to have made. He was reaching out beyond the normally closed auto business for non-auto men, and he was hiring a group which had just come out of the most terrible war in modern times, but whose experience was not in the failure and stupidity of war, but rather in the technology of it, indeed the technological success of war, their chief lesson being that you could control an organization by having an abundance of facts and data which were in turn convertible to industrial production. They were, in short, purveyors of what would be a new managerial art in American industry.

SO THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY AT THE END of the war was a very sick company. Its practices, both in production and in personnel, had an almost medieval quality to them. Under old Henry and Harry Bennett there was to have been no unionism and virtually no sharing of authority. The public was a problem, the unions were a problem, the bankers were a problem. If Ford built a car, it was the public's responsibility to like it. And the company had no credit. Edsel Ford had tried to fight his father's policies, but Bennett had destroyed him; young Henry had led a family revolt and as a result had inherited the shell of a company, the name and perhaps not that much more, at a time when General Motors seemed to exemplify everything modern in production and managerial techniques. What young Henry needed, above all else, were instant executives: Ford was losing nine million a month. But he needed, as one friend would admit, two levels of management; one now, in-



"McNamara was, in business philosophy no less than in personal life, the Puritan."

stantly, and one to come along. So in hiring the Whiz Kids he was hiring for the future, the near future, but the future nonetheless. At the same time he shrewdly covered all bets and hired a senior level of management from General Motors, men in their late forties and early fifties, who could go to work that day and help train his new intellectuals in the auto business. This was to be known in automotive circles as the Breech-Crusoe-Harder group, headed by Ernie Breech, then forty-nine, who had been at General Motors for most of his adult life, and was at the time the president of Bendix. Breech brought with him Lewis Crusoe, another high General Motors executive, now retired, and Delmar Harder, former chief of production of GM. The arrival of the GM executive group, which the Whiz Kids had not known was to happen, slowed down the latter's takeover of Ford (Thornton, restless, left after a year and a half for Hughes Aircraft, where he sensed greater possibilities, finally ending up at Litton Industries). But the system worked very well for Henry Ford. The young men were scattered throughout the company (with McNamara and Arjay Miller, who succeeded McNamara as president of Ford, working in finance). There they worked to convert the incredibly archaic, helter-skelter operation of old Henry to the new classic corporate style used at General Motors, with its highly accountable decentralized units, the different company operations turned into separate profit and loss centers where each executive would be held directly responsible, and where slippage and failure would be quickly spotted. The lead of General Motors in that postwar period was enormous: Ford had very little in the way of a factory, its machinery was badly outdated, not easily retooled. In contrast, GM had converted to war production but it had been very careful to establish in its factory and production lines the kind of systems that could be easily converted to peacetime production. Chevy thus had a massive lead: it could bring out a car for much less than it actually did, but if it lowered its prices it would kill Chrysler and bring the

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wrath of the Congress down for antitrust. ("Don't ever hire anyone from the auto industry," Gene McCarthy, one of McNamara's severest critics, later said of him. "The way they have it rigged it's impossible to fail out there.") So Chevy kept its prices higher and produced a much better car than Ford. The true difference between Ford and Chevy then was reflected in the used-car market: a two-year-old Chevy sold on the used-car market for about \$200 more than a two-year-old Ford, a very considerable gap. The prime aim of the two new management teams at Ford was to close the gap. Here Breech and McNamara combined their talents: they had to figure out how to produce a car that was at least partially competitive with Chevrolet, and at the same time make enough profit that could be ploughed back into the company to build the desperately needed plants. They couldn't do it by borrowing from the banks, Ford's credit rating simply wasn't good enough, so they did it by skinning down the value of the car, mainly on the inside where it wouldn't be seen. Ford had always been known for styling and speed, so they kept that, and worked on having a modern design, with a zippy car, good for the youth market; though eventually, and sometimes not so eventually, the rest of the car would deteriorate (as was also reflected in the used-car price). The Ford buyers seemed to know it, but curiously enough continued to buy Fords. By these means Breech got the money to buy and modernize the plants, while it was McNamara's particular genius to raise the quality without raising the cost, a supreme act of cost effectiveness. This was, of course, McNamara's specialty, and he had a bonus system to reward stylists and engineers who could improve the car without increasing the cost. The McNamara phrase—it came up again and again at meetings, driven home like a Biblical truth—was "add value rather than cost to the car." And slowly he and Breech closed the gap on the used-car differential while at the same time modernizing the company.

It was at Ford during this period that McNamara was being converted from a bright, hard-charging young statistician into a formidable figure, a legend, *McNamara* the entity, someone to respect, someone to fear, a man who rewarded those who met his standards handsomely, and coldly rejected those who did not.

If someone were to be driving with Bob during work hours, he would see it: Bob was driving, but he was thinking of grilles that day, only grilles existed for him, cheap ones, expensive ones, flashy ones, simple ones, other cars rushing by on their way to lunch, on their way home, and Bob running it through his mind, oblivious to oncoming traffic, frightening his companions. Bob, watch the road, one would say, and, if he were in a good mood, he might apologize for his mental absence. McNamara never stopped pushing—in those days he was watching Chevy, how was Chevy doing. The night each year they got hold of the first Chevy, everyone gathered around in a special room, and broke it down piece by piece into hundreds of

pieces, each one stapled to a place already laid out for it, and they concentrated on it—no brain surgeon ever concentrated more—everyone muttering, wondering how Chevy had done this or that for a tenth of a cent less, cursing them slightly, so that was how they had done it.

When Thornton left, there was considerable curiosity as to who would emerge as the top Whiz Kid; the answer soon became clear. McNamara was brilliant at telling Ford where it was going before it got there. He set up a corporate accounting system which reduced the element of surprise in the business. His system of rewards for reducing costs provided incentive (though occasionally, in the view of his critics there, this system backfired, the rewards going to people and ideas whose efficiency would be only short-range). In addition, he had the advantage of moving in something of a leadership vacuum. Henry Ford was new and unsure of himself, particularly in the field of financial systems. To an uneasy, uncertain Ford, McNamara offered reassurance; when questions arose he always seemed to have the answers, not vague estimates, but certitudes, facts, numbers, and lots of them. Though his critics might doubt that he knew what the public wanted or what it was doing, he could always forecast precisely the Ford part of the equation. He had little respect for much of the human material he found around him, the people who claimed, when he reeled off his overwhelming statistics, that they had always done it the other way in the auto business. Such people, when they challenged him, were often proven wrong. Slowly he surrounded himself with men who met his criteria, men who responded to the same challenges and beliefs, and he would respect their judgments. This was a formative experience in his life, because years later, when the doubters about Vietnam began to express themselves, they at first tended to be people who did not talk his language and who were very different from his kind of people. They did not think in terms of statistics, or rationalizing systems, and they did not support their judgments with facts as he knew them, but rather by saying things like it all smelled wrong, or that it just didn't feel right; he would trust his facts and statistics and instincts against theirs just as he had before at Ford when confronted by the businessmen who had doubted his facts and charts.

IN DETROIT SOCIETY, HE WAS ODD MAN IN. The auto world represents a very special piece of American society, one in which the already exaggerated American normal gets exaggerated even more. It is like a mini-Texas. Detroit feels not so much like the automobile capital as the very core and regulator of the consumer drives of this country. The city believes in building, selling, moving, above all, expansion—always more, always up, a bigger car with more on it, a newer car with more comfort. The rest of the world might be content to ogle last year's car, or even the year's before that, but Detroit is perpetually on its way to the new one. At its

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upper levels, the auto world is pleasantly closed in, speaking only to itself. In the rest of the country people might be tearing at one another, feeling the bitterness, say, of racial tension or international crises, but in the Detroit of the auto executive, if more cars have been sold this year than last, all is well; if you sell more cars, Detroit is healthy. Auto men talk to other auto men, auto traditions are passed on from generation to generation. Ford people live among Ford people, General Motors, among GM people; there is a Ford country club, a General Motors country club. Cocktail conversations and dinner conversations are of cars and the company.

McNamara, then, was never of this Detroit, never really, even, of the auto industry. They were back-slappers, and he was never one for the slapped back, either his or theirs. Even his public-relations man was different. Other PR men specialized in expense-account lunches, plush trips, the usual lures to journalists. McNamara paid a handsome salary to a man named Holmes Brown because Brown knew a lot about the auto industry and was very well informed, and his treatment of reporters was considered by Detroit standards unusually Spartan. While his counterparts frolicked, McNamara ploughed through the unabridged Toynbee. He made a point of living in Ann Arbor among the eggheads, many of them liberals and Democrats (at Ford executive meetings, Henry Ford would occasionally mention contributions to the Republican party and then note with a certain distaste that "Bob here" would probably donate to the Democrats), reading books, buying paintings; he socialized with his colleagues as little as he could. When the dealers and their wives showed up each year, by tradition the head of Ford would show the men around for a day while the wife took care of the ladies. Normally the wives were given a fashion show. Under Marg McNamara they went on a tour of the University of Michigan Cyclotron. It was said that the McNamaras deliberately managed to be elsewhere when Henry and Anne Ford gave gala coming-out parties for their daughters.

But all this was more than just a stylistic difference with Detroit. McNamara was, in business philosophy no less than in personal life, the Puritan. The auto business is not necessarily the place for someone with an abiding faith in man as a rational being, for the buying of a car is not necessarily a rational act. Detroit has been happiest when it is selling a potential customer more than he needs, adding space, chrome, hard tops, soft tops, air conditioners, speakers, extra horsepower. McNamara not only thought the customer *should* be rational; what was even worse, in the eyes of some of his colleagues, McNamara thought he *was* rational. It pained him to approve a convertible, the idea that a customer would pay \$200 more for a dangerous car that would deteriorate more rapidly being personally offensive to him. (After he left Ford and they made a convertible version out of his beloved Falcon, he wrote a rare message to a friend at Ford—"you must be crazier than hell.")

It was as if he felt there were certain things which were good for people and other things which were bad, and that he would be the arbiter. His, said one friend, was a quiet kind of arrogance: he simply knew better, and these facts that he came up with were the proof. He believed deeply in the simple utilitarian car. His opponents in the auto industry argued that this is not the way the world is, that man will opt for comfort and status every time and has done so throughout history. One of his colleagues remarked that McNamara should have been the head of production at the Moskva works in the Soviet Union—no worry about frills there. A friend said of him that he not only believed in rationality, he loved it. It was his only passion. If you offended it at a meeting, you were not just wrong, you had violated something far greater, like offending a man's religion. If you did it, showed a flash of irrationality, supported the wrong position, he would change, speaking faster, the voice like a machine gun, cutting into you. Chop chop chop. You miscalculated here. Chop. You left this out. Chop. You neglected this. Chop. Therefore you're wrong. Chop. Chop. Chop.

He was overpowering; his power was facts, no one had more, and no one used them better, firing them out, one after another, devastating his opponents (though sometimes friends would feel that there was a missing piece, that sometimes this brilliant reasoning was based, yes, on a false assumption). He was, if anything, too strong a personality; he so dominated meetings that other men felt submerged and suppressed. Sometimes his meetings seemed to less friendly eyes to have a sham quality. There would be a meeting, say, to plan a car, its style, content, and prospective price. McNamara would arrive at the meeting with his own homework done, his own decisions made, so that he came with a fixed position. He would seemingly defer to the others, ask what they thought, yet there was an overpowering personality and ego there. He perhaps did not mean it to be that way, but despite the appearance of give and take, the whole thing would become something of a sham, the classic Harvard Business School approach with loaded dice. Those who attended the meetings learned to play the game; the McNamara requests to speak freely were not to be taken too seriously. He would telegraph his own viewpoint, more often than not unconsciously, in the way he expressed the problem, and in particular he would summarize in an intimidating way, outlining point by point, using the letters of the alphabet, A through J, if necessary, and his position always seemed to win out in the summation. If you dissented or deviated, he listened, but you could almost hear the singers wanting to drum on the table: if you agreed and gave pro evidence, he would respond warmly, his voice approving in tone. Gradually those who disagreed learned their lesson, and just as gradually he would reach out to men who were like him until he was surrounded by men in his own image. Those who knew him well could tell when he was angry, when he was going to explode. He would become

tense, and if you looked under the table you could see him begin to hitch up his pants, a nervous habit, done because he knew he could not control his hands if they were on the table. The more restless he became, the more his antagonist assaulted his senses, the higher the pants would get, showing thick hairy legs. On bad days the pants might reach to the knees, and then suddenly he would talk, bang bang bang. You're wrong for these reasons. Flicking his fingers out. One. Two. Three. He always ran out of fingers.

fectly suited to what Ford needed and could afford "His greatest triumph was the Falcon, the vindication of his years at Ford, the definitive utilitarian car, the direct descendant of the Model T, his ultimate contribution to cost effectiveness, a car low enough in price to compete with foreign imports but large enough to transport an American family around. He did not want a revolutionary car, just a classic, simple car. It was a great success, though not as great as McNamara had hoped; he envisioned a million in the first year, and it went instead to 600,000. Its success was to come just before he left Ford; it enabled him to gain the presidency, and he left on a note of triumph. But after he left, Lee Iacocca, who would eventually succeed him, said that Bob McNamara had damn near ruined Ford by pushing that Falcon, too simple a car, with too small a profit for the company. Iacocca symbolized exactly the opposite of McNamara in the auto world. For instance, he brought racing to Ford, and Henry liked that, Henry pictured with his pretty new wife in Europe after having virtually bought LeMans, an invasion of American power and industry somewhat short of that flashed on D-Day. McNamara hated all that, hated racing, and now here was Henry and the Ford name advertising for it. Lee brought in the Mustang, a car designed for the American consumer in just the way McNamara's cars were not. They had looked at the design and thought, we have a doll of a car and people will buy it, and now let's figure out how to build it. Lee liked bigger, plusher, flashier cars, and to him the Falcon was a reminder that Ford might be growing customers for GM, bringing them into auto consumption and then as they grew wealthier turning them over to GM, which was stronger in the middle range of cars. So Lee was critical of McNamara, and so occasionally was Henry Ford, now more confident, now more his own man, and sometimes given to making statements which indicated a measure of disenchantment with McNamara, that perhaps the good old-style auto people were better than the new intellectuals."

THOUGH HE WAS OFTEN BLAMED FOR the Edsel (particularly by Barry Goldwater in 1964), he had remarkably little to do with it; the car was essentially antithetical to his position. The old GM people at Ford had long wanted to emulate the GM pattern, a different car in each of several different markets, different stalls in the market place (Ford-Mercury-Lincoln dealers were together, whereas the GM lines were sold separately). Finally they saw their chance: upgrade Mercury and slip the Edsel in between. The decision was made in 1955, a prime year, but the car came to fruition in 1958, which was a bad auto year, post-Sputnik, the worst year, for instance, Buick had. When the Edsel went bad, Lewis Crusoe had a heart attack, and McNamara was put in charge of all the car divisions. He consolidated some of the other divisions and put a stop to the Edsel.

Instead of playing games with consumer tastes, he spent those years fighting the battle to keep the prices down and the cars simple, fighting with the other people at Ford, fighting with the dealers. Always trading and swapping to hold the line. The dealers wanted more frills. The dealers wanted a crank on the front-window vents. And McNamara would say, all right, you can have that, but we'll have to take all the chrome off the car. Some of the men fought about the width of the car, wanting it wider so it could be a hardtop, which entailed a wider frame. McNamara would listen and tell them (words which would be remembered long after), "If you persist in demanding this, I'll have to take the car away from you." The men around him began to shade things in talking to him, not really lies, just a certain hedging of the truth to please him. He for instance wanted a two-speed automatic transmission. So he promoted a design which would perform as well as a three-speed but cost less. There were considerable doubts that the two-speed would work as well, but he was finally given assurances that it would; the engineers wanted it to work because he wanted it to work, because there would be bonuses and smiles of approval, but sadly it never did: it performed durably, but sluggishly, just as his critics had predicted.

Yet he was good at Ford, no mistake of that. He brought his system to that declining empire at just the right time, they held the line, they did not decay and collapse as they might have, and they finally grew back, in part owing to his enormous drive and pressure, his utilitarian view, probably per-

IT IS NOT AN EASY THING, BEING A PURITAN in Babylon, that is, living privately the life of a Puritan but competing with the other Babylonians in the daytime pursuit of profit and growth. And the Ford Co. McNamara was an immensely complicated man. He would have been a simple man had he stayed on in a university, taught there, lived there, sent his students out into the world a little better for their experience with him, but essentially one man, no difference between the theory and practice of McNamara. But this was different, he had entered business. He who had little material drive of his own was committed to making it in the world of profit and excess and, indeed, greed, to hold power in this world. Thus, a complicated man, the lives he led in Ann Arbor and in Detroit being so many more than their statutory miles apart. In the former, he was a man who read the right books,

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went to local art openings, supported the local cultural affairs that needed supporting—Marg belonging, of course, to the local U.N. Society and both of them belonging to an egghead group which met once a month (no more than two drinks per person per meeting) for the discussion of a book led by one of their number, each of them in turn. Bob's book was Camus, *The Rebel*, his intellectualism even then a little self-conscious. It wasn't so much that he was philosophical as that he *liked* to be philosophical. He liked to improve himself, the ultimate self-improvement man. Later, when he arrived in Washington, he was to leave some of that city's more skeptical residents with the feeling that there was a great deal of Gee Whiz in his intellectual pursuits—he had just talked to Barbara Ward and she had said this and this. At the Robert Kennedy Hickory Hill seminars, which were a symbolic feature of the vastly overrated New Frontier culture, McNamara was a constant and deadly serious student, always as usual doing his homework, always asking an earnest question.

Yet all this involved, had to involve, a daily switchover—the driving, relentless, cost-effective president of Ford by day and the resident philosopher of Ann Arbor by night, one cold and efficient, the other warm, almost gregarious. It was as if he had compartmentalized his mind; the fine thoughts were important, but did not play a part in one's everyday outlook. If the immensity of the contradiction between his liberal instincts and the war in Vietnam was one day to cause him grief, in the same way the difference between his social and intellectual conscience and the needs of a great industry had, in this earlier time, to cause him problems. It was as if the very contradictions of our age were all within him. He could at Ford be a believer in consumer rights, hating the dealers and the way the parts system worked, with dealers jamming spare parts down customers' throats and reaping the profits on the labor costs for repairs, but at the same time he had also to be very much a part of it all because it was very lucrative. The dealers, after all, in those years did not get the choice items from Detroit unless they sold the requisite number of parts to their customers. (Just as in the Pentagon, he would be at once a symbol of an attempt to control the arms race and one of the world's great arms salesmen to other countries, because the sale of arms cut Pentagon costs, was good for the budget, looked good on the Hill, made the President smile.) He believed in auto safety, yet he never really pushed the issue until 1956, when Ford was flat beaten by Chevy and knew it. Ford was in the last year of a three-year cycle, and Chevy had a hot new car, a sharp new style, a V-8 engine, and Ford was dead. The Ford people had to go back to their car and see what they could do with it. There was little to add in the way of options, and so they decided to sell safety. It was not often, one of them said, that you got to be on the side of both God and profits. It was McNamara's idea, he had long been genuinely concerned about safety, yet it was also a last-minute

decision and a desperate one. They added some safety latches, a deep-dish steering wheel, crash padding in front, and called in J. Walter Thompson to do the campaign. The campaign was that Ford was safe, and safety was good for you, something that sounds mild enough to the uninitiated but was nothing less than revolutionary within the auto business. Then the cars came out, and, predictably, Chevy was a great success; McNamara's job even seemed to be on the line. Then he caught the flu and went to Florida for a rest. While he was gone, certain General Motors executives and some of their old friends at Ford tried a coup against McNamara. Apparently, high GM officials called Henry Ford and said—look, this is serious, you're ruining the auto industry, you're selling death, the image you're projecting is violent and ugly. With Henry's sanction, some of the former GM men, led by Crusoe, took over certain of McNamara's functions. This was in effect a takeover. There were even rumors that McNamara was completely out. He was in fact close to being out, and the McNamara people, that is, the people whose loyalty was in a way more to him than to the auto business, were extremely nervous. But he rose from the ashes, saved not so much by the generosity of Henry Ford or the Ford power structure, but by the 1957 Ford and the much despised dealers, who knew they had a hot car (one of the two years while he was at Ford that Ford beat Chevrolet) and were willing to stay with the '56 in order to get the '57. The auto industry is after all a very volatile business, what goes up goes up very quickly and can come down very quickly as well. So Ford decided to cut back on the '56, minimize its losses, virtually drop its safety pitch; the new advertising was changed to Style, Performance, and, yes, you could barely hear it, safety. Thus the campaign died, and it was not untypical of McNamara at Ford, and later at Defense, that he had started with good intentions touched with a certain expediency and powered by a little dissembling, and had ended up not with a success but with something even worse. For it became a part of auto mythology that safety does not sell, safety is bad and hurts business, and it would take another decade and an outsider named Ralph Nader, who did not worry about hiding his intentions or making it in the business world, to put full moral pressure on the auto industry to bring some safety and consumer reform.

When McNamara left Ford, then, most of his friends in Ann Arbor felt he left with a sigh of relief, that he had never really liked the auto industry and never really felt enough social value in it. They believed also that Marg always felt that selling cars was a little unbecoming. It was as if once he found he could make it at Ford, and rise up, he was bored with the other men who could talk only about cars: as if presented with a challenge, he had mastered it in order to give himself credibility and respectability in the world of business. He made profits for Henry not because he was interested in profits, but because his power was based on his relationship with Henry.

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In 1955, he was asked to give the commencement address at the University of Alabama, and he wrote a speech which said that there had to be a higher calling for a businessman than simply making money. Ernie Breech saw the advance text and insisted that it come out. McNamara was very bitter and thought of canceling the speech. Damn it, he told friends, I'm making more money for them than they've ever made before. Why can't they leave me alone? But the friends told him that they had not said he couldn't say this; they had simply refused to permit it in the advance text. So he went down there and when he got to the appointed place, he inserted it, shouted it out, so that it could be heard all the way back in Detroit.

Thus, when he was offered the Defense job, his close friends were not really surprised. He had, they thought, been looking for a larger and more satisfying stage. The only thing which would keep him would be a sense of responsibility to Henry. And there were people at Ford who were pleased, too, feeling that the company under this coldly driving efficient man had been too stifling; he had been too strong, almost to the point of suppressing other talent. And the people in Ann Arbor were pleased, too. The pleasant liberals in his book club were reassured to see this humane man that they admired so much harnessed to a new and difficult job. Robert Angell, for many years head of the sociology department at Michigan and a member of the book club, who had been impressed by the breadth of McNamara's mind, went to his classes that morning; instead of beginning with the regularly scheduled work, he talked movingly about McNamara, about how lucky the country was to have this kind of man in such a tough job—a man who was far more than a businessman, a real philosopher with a conscience and a human sensitivity. Later, when the Bay of Pigs happened, Angell and the others would receive something of a shock. How could Bob be involved in something like this? Angell, a very gentle man, decided, talking with some of Bob's other friends, that they had made Bob go along. Then he went out to Vietnam and Angell turned on his television set and there was Bob talking about putting people in fortified villages. Angell would wonder, what's happened to Bob, he sounds so different. His friends in Ann Arbor would watch him with his pointer as he crisply explained where the bombs were going. Angell would duly set off for the first teach-in against the war, held at Michigan, and he and the other friends would always wonder what had happened to Bob. They would hear that Marg had been sick, that the war had torn Bob up, but they would not talk about it with him because Bob did not come back to visit with them.

HE HAD COME IN AT A DEAD RUN. By the time he was sworn in he had already identified the hundred problems of the Defense Department. He had groups and committees studying them. He had his people, the bright young men, plucked off the

campuses or the shadow government of the Rand Corporation and other think-tanks. They were cool and lucid, men of mathematical precision who had grown up in the atmosphere of the Cold War, students of nuclear power and parity and deployment whose very professions sometimes, to the humanist, seemed uncivilized. He had taken over the Defense Department for a man who had run on the premise of getting America moving again. (One pictured them always without overcoats and hats, pushing quickly through crowds, always on the move. Kennedy had once gotten angry at Robert Bird, a reporter for the *Herald Tribune*, because Bird had written that the reason this dynamic young man was able to campaign without an overcoat in the cold of New Hampshire and Wisconsin was that he wore thermal underwear.) The assumption was that we were losing our power and manhood, that there was a missile gap. McNamara had decided that his first job when he took over would be to close the missile gap. But there was no missile gap, and shortly after the election, McNamara told Pentagon reporters this. It was a statement which caused considerable agitation, particularly among Republicans who had lost an election in part over a gap which turned out not to be a gap at all. Kennedy called McNamara the next day to find out what had happened, and McNamara denied that he had ended the missile gap, a denial that made the Pentagon press corps which had heard the statement with its very own ears somewhat leery of his word in the future.

But it was true there was no missile gap, and so instead of building up the might of the United States and catching the Russians, he set out to harness that might and above all to limit the use of nuclear weapons. This became his passion, and Vietnam, which was a tiny storm cloud on the horizon, seemed distant, small, and manageable, far from the real center of man's question of survival or self-destruction. (He could be cavalier about it, however. When Taylor and Rostow had recommended sending advisers to Vietnam and upping the number of Americans to 15,000, George Ball had warned that this would mean 300,000 men within five years. McNamara had thought this warning absurd, but he was for sending a few men, even if we eventually had to send 300,000 men—something which staggered Ball as well as the President.) Indeed, it is one of the smaller ironies of his years as Secretary of Defense that in making his relentless arguments against nuclear weapons, he had to make counterarguments for conventional forces. If the Joint Chiefs wanted to send American combat troops to Vietnam without nuclear weapons, he had to go along, since he had developed the mystique of what conventional weapons could do with the new mobility.

It was a different time then. These were the immediate post-Eisenhower years, and the Chiefs, who were Eisenhower Chiefs (men like Ridgway and Taylor who believed in a more balanced posture had been either winnowed out or more or less ignored), were men who believed that nuclear war

was a viable military posture. The entire American military posture was essentially based on a willingness to use nuclear weapons. That was an eerie enough thought, and so some people wanted to crawl back from it. Men such as Henry Kissinger, then of Harvard, had just made himself something of an intellectual reputation as a theoretician of tactical nuclear weapons—of finding something respectable between blowing up the world and being too soft.

DE A young civilian assistant in those days would remember his passion about nuclear weapons. He felt very strongly about the risk of nuclear war—a deep and abiding reluctance to use any kind of nuclear weapons. He was skeptical about tactical weapons. “They’re the same thing, there’s no difference,” he said. “Once you use them, you use everything else. You can’t keep them limited. You’ll destroy everything.” It was, the young man thought, an impressive performance, not just because of the almost emotional abhorrence of the weapons, but because McNamara understood exactly the dangers of his situation. He knew that if the Chiefs or Congress found out how he felt, he would be finished as Secretary of Defense. The young civilian had heard that McNamara was a man without convictions or emotions, but decided that this was a deliberately chosen pose, an effective one to cover real feelings. We had sold the idea of nuclear retaliation to the Europeans, our whole budget was based on it, and yet here was a Secretary of Defense who did not believe in it. If the word got out of his doubts, it would mean in effect that the U.S. was virtually disarmed, and he would not be able to stay in office.

Shortly after lunch, the civilian got a call from another McNamara aide who had been present during the meeting. “You must not speak of this lunch to anyone. It is of the highest importance. Not to anyone. It must not get around.” The young civilian agreed, and then mentioned that he had heard that the President himself felt the same way about the weapons. There was a story going around hip Pentagon circles that Kennedy was unreliable, almost soft on “nukes.” He had been taken to visit a SAC base and they had shown him a twenty-megaton bomb, and Kennedy had visibly blanched. Why do we need one of these? he had asked, and it was a scandal in SAC circles because this of course was the standard bomb. “There is no difference between them at all,” McNamara’s aide answered.

McNamara felt himself surrounded by hostile forces in his quest. He had no following on the Hill; he noticed that his enemies did. So his loyalty to the President, which was strong in any case, was doubly strong. The President was his only patron and protector in this savage world in which he was now operating. He worked hard to control the weapons system and to change Western policy-thinking about it. He set out to educate not just the Pentagon but his European colleagues as well, forming the Nuclear Planning Group for them—these men who were politicians first, not managers, and who thus felt themselves particularly depen-



“We had sold the idea of nuclear retaliation to the Europeans, our whole budget was based on it, and yet here was a Secretary of Defense who did not believe in it.”

dent on their generals. McNamara pressured them year after year to hire professional staffs, and he would take extra trips to Europe in order to persuade them to have their staffs on hand. He forced them to build a table where only the defense ministers could sit, to speak for themselves with no prepared papers or set speeches. They came to the meetings and could not be dependent upon the generals (who were dependent on their colonels)—only one person from each country at the table, only four others allowed in the room. At first this did not work too well because McNamara overwhelmed them, but gradually he forced them to take political responsibility for defense positions and, equally important, build skilled professional staffs which could challenge the thinking of the military at the lower levels.

When he had entered office he had found the nuclear system surprisingly hair-trigger and chancy. The military had constructed a system in which the prime consideration was not control, but getting the deterrent into the air, no matter what; controls and safeguards were secondary. It was very dangerous, a succession of ambiguous circumstances, and the nuclear hardware might start flying. Even on the weapons themselves, the safety features seemed marginal. There was, he decided, far too great a chance that one could go off in a crash, and he insisted on other safety features being added. He evolved the PAL, Permissive Action Link, as a system to put a lock on nuclear weapons. It was developed first as a technical device to lock up all nuclear weapons not under U.S. control. Technically none of the nuclear weapons here in the United States could be used without a specific order from the President. In practice, if the Chiefs felt that communications had failed they could still use the weapons, based on their best

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judgment. It was all a very subtle thing. Once he got started with the rationale of keeping the weapons from the less Anglo-Saxon peoples of NATO, he was able eventually to slip the controls on American weapons. The military fought hard. To them the threat that the reaction time would be slowed down was greater than that a crackpot might take over a base.

McNamara was already a compromised figure. He was fighting for the highest needs of mankind, plotting against the bureaucracy, dissembling inside—but eventually the compromises he made did not really work out satisfactorily. To a degree his problem was the era (and how much the new President felt he could challenge the existing conditions, and how much he wanted to). The nation was beginning to emerge from a period of enormous political and intellectual rigidity because of the Cold War—a period which nonetheless had seen a great jump in the technological power of the United States. The growth of the sophistication of weapons and the enormous increase in their price had given the Pentagon a quantum jump in power. Its relationship with the Congress, always strong, but based in the past largely on patriotism and relatively minor pork-barrel measures, was now strengthened by a new loyalty based on immense defense contracts, conveniently placed around the homes of the most powerful committee chairmen.

How many places could he fight? If he had tried to turn the country around on chemical and biological warfare, for instance, Russell surely would have opened hearings. Did you want a fight on everything? By holding them off on the B-70, a bomber which no one needed, he almost brought on a constitutional crisis, with the Congress passing the money that the Executive branch did not want to spend. He was constantly fighting with the Chiefs, but also deciding how much each point was worth. On the test-ban treaty McNamara virtually locked them in a room for a week to fight it out with them. He made them promise that once he had broken an argument they could not go back to it, because he felt that arguing with the Chiefs was a lot like arguing with your mother; you win a point and go on to the next only to find that they are back at the first. So, for a week, hour after hour, he went through every objection they had, breaking them down point by point, until finally he won. He read his victory as a conversion. But his aides felt differently: they felt he had shown how important the treaty was to him, and as one said later, it was virtually a case of going along with him or resigning. But how many issues were worth this much effort, particularly since many of these fights were not his by tradition. It should have been the Secretary of State, not of Defense, who was fighting for a nuclear-test ban.

Yet he took over at a time when the world was changing. The threats of the Soviet Union were not the same. There was no longer a Communist monolith. (The Chiefs, for instance, were far slower to accept the Sino-Soviet split than most people in Washington, believing it finally when the Russians

massed troops on the Chinese border.) The bureaucracy around him often seemed more rigid than the needs of the world required. More missiles for NATO. More troops. Bigger bombers. It was as if at a crucial moment in history he sensed the problems and the end of certain myths and worked hard to correct them, yet as if finally it was all too much. His record clouded even on nuclear weapons. In 1961 some White House aides were trying to slow the arms race. At that point the U.S. had 450 missiles, and McNamara was asking for 950, and the Chiefs were asking for 3,000. The White House people had quietly checked around and found that in effectiveness the 450 were the same as McNamara's 950.

"What about it, Bob?" Kennedy asked.

"Well, they're right," he answered.

"Well, then, why the 950, Bob?" Kennedy asked.

"Because that's the smallest number we can take up on the Hill without getting murdered," he answered.

Perhaps, thought one of the White House aides, if we had not gone up then, the Russians might not have gone up, and we might have slowed the cycle.

HE COMPILED AN AWESOME RECORD in Washington in those days. He was a much-sought-after figure, a man of impressive qualities. In a flashy Administration which placed great emphasis on style, McNamara was at home. He had always liked style among people at Ford, judging them not only by what they said, but how they said it. He was popular at dinner parties and was considered unusual in that he did not bore women at dinner by talking about nuclear warheads. He was a friend of Jack and Jackie, of Bobby and Ethel, and yet he lived simply, driving his own car more often than not, a beat-up old Ford. He was gay when the occasion called for gaiety, sober when it called for sobriety. If he made enemies on the Hill, they were at least the right enemies—Vinson, Stennis, Rivers—men hardly revered by social-intellectual Washington. His Congressional appearances were impressive, well-prepared, grim, and humorless. McNamara testifying on the Hill was not someone you wanted to cross. Yet he was unbending, he knew too many answers. The Hill didn't like that. He was perhaps a little too *smart*, and when Southerners say someone is smart they are not necessarily being complimentary. Roswell Gilpatrick cautioned him, suggesting that it would be a good idea to go over and have a few drinks occasionally, get to know the boys, humanize yourself and your intentions. The oil in the wheels of government was bourbon. But McNamara would have none of it. He worked a fourteen-hour day already; if he did his job and presented his facts accurately and intelligently, then they would do their job by accepting his accuracy and there was no need to waste time in missionary work. He had his responsibilities and they theirs, and if they could not see the rightness of what he was doing, he did not think he could woo them by drinking. Probably he was right.

He was, thought the men around him, a good man—indeed, one of them noted, “almost a bit of a Christer, a bit of the do-gooder, if you scratch him deep enough.” Able, energetic, he was drafted to the cause because he was available, he worked harder than other men, and he always had a sense that he should serve. The harder the job, the more he would feel the obligation to take the heat for the President—something which Kennedy, cool and reluctant to get in any unnecessary battles, much admired. The President knew that when Goldwater or the generals went after McNamara, they were really going after him. But there was something else which the White House staff admired about McNamara, and this was the fact that he could be open-minded. When he was wrong he could change his mind. He had ego, one knew, and he was self-assured almost in a Bundy-esque way, but he could switch without feeling a loss of face.

In the spring of 1963, when there was no real idea that a test-ban treaty was coming, the word slipped out that Stennis was going to hold hearings on the state of the nation’s preparedness. The preceding negotiations with the Russians had come surprisingly close to a treaty, and there was a feeling that things might be moving in that direction. But the threat of Stennis’s hearings was a serious one. In the hearings you call in the generals who call for more preparedness and lament our present weakness, you create a more antagonistic climate, you worry the Senate and you worry the President, and you create a record which opponents of the treaty can work off. Some White House representatives went to see McNamara and warned him what was coming. McNamara was rather casual about it at first. He did not think that they were that close to a treaty. Anyway, if he made his case too soon, it would be easy for the opposition to counter it. Let Stennis have his hearings and we’ll wait. The White House people bowed to his superior judgment.

A few weeks later they heard that John McCone had lent CIA specialists on nuclear weapons to Stennis to help him make the case against the treaty—McCone had always opposed the treaty—and the White House people sensed that things might be more serious than they had imagined, and that this was in effect a confirmation that Stennis and McCone thought the treaty might be close. So Carl Kaysen got together with Abe Chayes, the State Department’s legal adviser, and with John McNaughton, who was an expert on arms control, and decided that their instincts about being worried were good ones. They went back to McNamara and spelled out their doubts; he listened for a few moments and then said—I agree, you’re right, and I was wrong: it is more serious, and you’re now the committee to oversee the Executive branch’s argument. McNaughton is the chief, and you’re to put together our case, check out who the witnesses are, and balance the record. Thus were the Stennis hearings negated.

Those who dealt with him in this matter came away impressed. This was a strong man, a sensitive man even if lacking in political sensitivity. If he

had weaknesses, one of them was a tendency to see problems as unrelated entities, not seeing that if you solved one problem you might create another—a vision so forceful that it did not see things on the periphery—and too much impatience with people who did not express themselves or their doubts well.

The combination of Kennedy-McNamara seemed to work well. The President had a broader sense of history, and it blended well with McNamara’s managerial ability, his capacity to take the problems of defense, which were almost mathematical in their complexity, and break them down. Kennedy understood the gaps in McNamara, knew that despite his brilliance he was not somehow the complete man. In 1962 McNamara, always cost-conscious, came charging into the White House ready to save millions on the budget by closing bases. Each base was figured to the fraction of the penny. Kennedy interrupted and said: Bob, you’re going to close the Brooklyn Navy Yard with twenty-six-thousand people and they’re going to be out of work and go across the street and draw unemployment, and you better figure that into the cost. That’s going to cost us something and they’re going to be awfully mad at me, and we better figure that in, too. Kennedy ended the closing-down. But in 1964, under Johnson, McNamara came back with the same proposals. Johnson, who loved economy, particularly little economies, was more interested in the idea, until Kenny O’Donnell, one of McNamara’s more constant critics within the government, who would argue vociferously with Bobby Kennedy that most of the mistakes of the Kennedy era had stemmed from McNamara, pointed out that the shipyards always tended to be in the districts of key Congressmen, men like John McCormack and John Rooney, and though it saved a few million it might cost them the Rules Committee.

VIETNAM HAD NOT SEEMED IMPORTANT in early 1961. Even in Southeast Asia, Laos seemed more important. The Laos lobby flourished to a considerable degree. When Kennedy had seen Eisenhower, it was the discussion of Laos which had turned Kennedy’s face white—gentle admonition from the outgoing President, whose proudest boast was that he had avoided any Americans’ being killed in combat during his eight years, that the U.S. would probably have to go to war over Laos, but that he, Dwight Eisenhower, would give John Kennedy his support. When the Kennedy Administration first came in, everyone was preoccupied with the Bay of Pigs, and of course, Laos and the Congo and Berlin, always Berlin. Vietnam was so unimportant that Rostow got it at the White House, Mac Bundy having given it away (Mae did not give away unhealthy countries, only healthy ones), and when a task force was created for it, symbolically, it was Defense not State which headed it, a vital insight into the way Washington regarded it—as a military problem. At Defense, it was Ros Gilpatric who headed it, not McNamara, a significant difference

“It wasn’t so much that he was philosophical as that he liked to be philosophical. He liked to improve himself, the ultimate self-improvement man.”

David Halberstam
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McNAMARA

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because McNamara liked to take the things which were difficult.

The Gilpatric committee had recommended a moderate boost for what seemed a less than healthy situation—largely fiscal reform, political reform, land reform, of course, and essentially an increase in the U.S. presence of about six thousand people, largely nonmilitary. What struck Gilpatric and the others when the issue went before the National Security Council was Kennedy's reluctance—indeed resistance—to putting in more people. There was not very much of an increase in the military commitment. Kennedy finally slipped into the recommendations of the report with irritated philosophical acquiescence. By the middle of 1961, McNamara began to sense the gravity of what was happening in Vietnam, that it was something to be reckoned with and watched, and something to protect the President on. And so a curious thing happened. McNamara did not just simply move into Vietnam and take some responsibility for it, aided by lots of bright young men at OSD. He took it over, becoming virtually the desk officer, with only John McNaughton, his most trusted deputy, eventually working with him. The other bright young men who worked so effectively for McNamara in other reaches of the Pentagon were isolated from Vietnam. It was important that Robert McNamara, who had unleashed these young men elsewhere in the Pentagon, now moved virtually alone into an area where he was least equipped to deal with the problems. Thus, what had worked for him so effectively in other areas—the challenge of the bright young men to the statistics and preconceptions at the lowest level, the ability to compete with military judgments—all this was gone.

The reasons for his decision to keep his civilians out were complicated. For one thing, Vietnam was a sensitive issue. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were already somewhat nervous about the use of systems analysis, sensing (not entirely inaccurately) that it was in effect about to become a civilian JCS, giving independent judgments; it was one thing to offer systems analysis in the technical and hardware areas, but it was quite another thing to compete with their judgment on a war. It would have immediately brought down Stennis and Rivers on him. The second reason was that although by and large he did not respect the military very much, he did think they were professional in one area: they knew how to fight a war. There was another factor, his great arrogance. McNamara, who *knew data*, would go over it more carefully than the military. Hence the portrait of McNamara at his desk, on planes, in Saigon, pouring over page after page of details about each province, each district, each company, battalion, platoon, squad. All those statistics. All lies.

Yet his eyes and instincts would never be able to come to terms with the morass of Vietnam. He studied a guerrilla war which always seemed to quantify so well—a feudal army backed up by the enormous firepower of the most powerful nation in the world, with tanks, airplanes, and helicopters, and fighting an essentially conventional war will

always have better kill statistics than a modern peasant army which uses its limited power in the refinements of guerrilla war. Add to that the fact that all Vietnamese commanders were liars. The reports they sent in were all lies since they never dared admit that they might lose one battle or suffer heavy casualties. If the American advisers knew that these were lies, they soon found out that MACV (Military Assistance Command in Vietnam) did not want an open challenge to the reporting.

A few brief glimpses of McNamara in Vietnam come to mind. He was taken in 1962 to Operation Sunrise, a model early strategic hamlet, by the GVN (Government of Vietnam). The population was obviously Vietcong, and filled with bitterness. McNamara innocently fired away questions: How much of this? How many of those? The amazed Vietnamese official suddenly realized that he did not understand it was all false, and grandly answered his questions....

McNamara arrived time after time for his on-the-spot visits, always acting out the carefully charted tours set up first by General Harkins and then by General Westmoreland, never planning his own impromptu itinerary, always traveling with generals at his side, getting faultless briefings, ill-prepared to ask the right questions. Vietnamese colonels would burst out of their paratrooper uniforms and speak good American, confirming the new dynamism, and always there were the charts.

What was created on those trips was not a knowledge of the country, but something worse and far more dangerous—an illusion of knowledge. He was getting the same information which was presented in Washington, but now it was presented much more effectively in Vietnam. McNamara was not cynical; he did not know any better. Years later, when he had turned against the war and was flying back to Washington, he talked with John Vann—one of the most knowledgeable dissenters and best-informed men in the country, a man carefully excluded from all high-level briefings for visitors (and allowed in on them, significantly, only after 1968 when he became marginally optimistic)—on why he had been misinformed. Vann told him bluntly it was all his own fault. He should have insisted on his own itinerary. He should have traveled without brass, and taken the time to find out who some of the more informed people were and talk with them.

He was always looking for his own criteria. Reporters would remember McNamara in 1965 going to I Corps near Da Nang and checking on the Marines' progress there. A Marine colonel had a sand table showing the terrain and was patiently giving the briefing. McNamara was not really taking it in; his hands were folded and he was frowning a little. Finally he interrupted: Now, let me see, if I have it right, this is your situation: and then it came out from him—all numbers and statistics, this many friendlies on this many operations, this many troops to attack 48 per cent of them after dark. The colonel was very bright and read him immediately, like a man breaking the code. Without changing stride, he went on with the briefing, simply switch-

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ing its terms. Out it came, all quantified, with percentages and indices. McNamara was fascinated now. The colonel's performance was so blatant it was like a satire, and one of the reporters began to laugh and had to leave the tent. Later that day the newsman went up to McNamara and commented on how tough the situation was up there, but McNamara wasn't interested in the Vietcong, he wanted to talk about the colonel: "That colonel is one of the finest officers I've ever met," he said.

But if he gleefully accepted information in this form, he resisted those who tried to question it. Stewart Alsop has told the story of Desmond Fitzgerald, the high-ranking CIA officer who used to brief McNamara, warning that in his opinion the statistics were all meaningless, that the U.S. was in for a rougher time than they indicated. McNamara asked him why, and he answered it was an instinct, a feeling; the CIA man received an incredulous stare and was never asked to brief the Secretary again. And there were other stories: in 1963, when Vietnam was beginning to deteriorate at a faster rate, a White House assistant would argue with him and finally McNamara would snap back and say, "You're talking well, but where are your facts? You state these things so glibly, you say the government has lost popularity recently. How much? What percentage did it have, and what percentage does it have now? Where is your data? Give me something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry." The civilian would answer that his information was based on firsthand knowledge and distrust of the kind of reporting McNamara was getting. But McNamara believed this reporting, and he did not believe that civilians could know as much as the military about war, about battles, and so when the civilian mentioned his sources, McNamara scoffed. This was, he said, a prejudiced data base. "All you do is go around and find someone who's against this thing and then you listen to him. That's your data base."

And so in these crucial middle years McNamara attached his name and reputation to the possibility and hopes for victory, caught himself more deeply on the morass of Vietnam, and limited himself greatly in his future actions. It is not a particularly happy chapter in his life. He did not serve himself nor the country well; he was, and there is no kinder or gentler word for it, a fool.

THREE WAS NOT, A FRIEND of McNamara's noticed in late 1967, a photograph of Lyndon Baines Johnson on the wall of Robert McNamara's office.

McNamara under Kennedy had been a satisfied and vital man, and a happy one. Kennedy, after all, had recognized his values and abilities. They seemed in step on the great issues, and if Kennedy had been too committed to the use of force at the beginning of the Administration, so had McNamara (although Kennedy was probably more than a step ahead of him in the conversion away from force that the era had produced). But there had

been an ease in the relationship between them.

McNamara, freed from Detroit, had a man who was superior to him intellectually, who had the ethical and intellectual sense one wanted in that office, and whose social life McNamara liked. (Before going to Washington he had talked with a friend and vowed that he would not be like Arthur Summersfield—also a gift of Detroit to American government. Summersfield's photograph had seemed to be in the Washington government papers every day for social doings. Bob had promised he would not be like that, but what did you know—as soon as Bob got to Washington, you couldn't pick up a paper without reading about him at a fancy dinner party.)

He was well-filtered in the Kennedy White House. The style there was informal, with plenty of diverse opinions. Kennedy, particularly at the end, was wary of institutional wisdom and mythology, and he exposed his higher officials to all kinds of challenges. This annoyed Rusk no end, since the Secretary was a great chain-of-command person, and he would be somewhat offended to find himself at a meeting with some junior desk officer from Laos, the desk officer speaking as if he were *an equal*. But McNamara was well-used; he was a tempered activist in those days.

The Johnson White House was another thing. Johnson was less sure of himself on many issues, less questioning of the assumptions of the era and of the Kennedy rhetoric than Kennedy himself was. LBJ seemed more awed by the luminous Easterners and by the Kennedy men than Kennedy had been. Johnson, someone who knew him well said, always had the problem of his own insecurity, particularly in the face of these luminary people. He suffered, in other words, not so much from a poor education as from his own belief that he had had a poor education. His insecurity was not a problem on domestic issues because he knew after three decades in the Congress that he was well-equipped there. His problem was in foreign affairs, and because he was unsure in this area he lacked pride and confidence in himself. He allowed the people around him to define him, and their view of the world became his view. The challenges of the younger men to their bureaucratic chiefs were challenges to him. The best idea was to find the best men, senior men picked by Kennedy—deans and Rhodes scholars and heads of the Ford Motor Company. Get from them the right point of view, the consensus, and then sign everybody on board. What did these younger people know anyway? And if they participated in meetings, hell, it would soon be all over Washington that there was division and dissension in the government and that he, Johnson, was a clown who didn't know about foreign affairs. Unsure of himself, wanting to protect himself, he closed off channels and took the same Kennedy men, and by using them in a different way, made them different men. All this would affect Rusk, who went from being Kennedy's liaison with the Hill to being a Secretary of State, and it would affect McNamara.

Johnson was unsure and McNamara was sure: